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**Scumbags! An ethnography of the interactions between street-based youth and police officers**

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**Abstract**

The interactions between young, disadvantaged, urban men and the rank-and-file officers who police them should be understood as layered structural, cultural and emotional phenomena. Using data from a multi-dimensional ethnographic project, this paper demonstrates that structural issues manifest in cultural scripts which place both groups in confrontation with each other. Within a tightly bound geographic district, competitiveness between them can be animated by intense emotionality. Frustration, humiliation, disdain and the potential for elation push both parties into behaviours that cannot be understood through discretion and confidence models of decision-making alone. Ultimately, through recognising how questions of inclusion/exclusion play out in simultaneously structural, cultural and emotive ways, the problems generated by negative interactions between the two groups might be meaningfully understood.

**Keywords:** Street Culture, Policing, Marginalised Youth, Ethnography, Masculinities

## **Scumbags! An ethnography of the interactions between street-based youth and police officers**

### **Introduction**

‘It’s a kip; we’re dealing with the bottom of society’s barrel. They’re scumbags’ (Warren, Regular Guard)<sup>1</sup>.

There is general agreement amongst the youth that the Gardaí are ‘scumbags’ (xxxx, 2007: 143)<sup>2</sup>.

The word ‘scumbags’ forms the title of this paper not just for provocation but because, as the quotes above indicate, the term is used by certain street youth and street-level officers to describe each other. This indicates the extent to which one of the key interactions driving the criminal justice system is animated by vehement emotions and viscerally contested ideas of moral legitimacy. Academic studies of the relationships between the police and public have not yet sufficiently unpacked and analysed this specific phenomenon. Research that focuses on either one of these parties, or on their interactions out of context, or on community attitudes to policing more generally do not necessarily have the scope to capture the full significance of what occurs when they meet. In this paper, I use the data from a multi-dimensional ethnography to provide an analysis that is simultaneously cognisant of the structural, cultural, emotional and interactional elements that inform the position-taking and behaviours of both groups. This approach is influenced by cultural criminology, which seeks to understand how power and inequality become intertwined with processes of meaning-making and ultimately impact on the way in which people behave (see Ferrell et al., 2015). It further warns against deploying overly rationalistic conceptions of crime and control given the intensity of the emotions involved in these processes. This paper demonstrates how abstract social structures animate situated moments of policing.

Below, I review literature relevant to police-street youth interaction. I then present ethnographic material gained from research with both street-based offending youth and their local police force in an area of inner-city Dublin, Ireland. Focusing on the consequences of class and gender in such interactions, it is recognised that in many other jurisdictions race should be added as an analytical category. With its own unique experience of colonialism and immigration, questions of race and policing in Ireland operate considerably differently there to the US and UK (see Mulcahy, 2012; O’Brien-Olinger, 2016). It can nevertheless be argued that broader issues of power and exclusion operate in a manner that is similar enough for the insights set out in this paper to apply more generally. This paper argues that the patterns of behaviour observed in interactions between street youth and street-based police officers are the product of mutually reinforcing cultural oppositions and dispositions rooted in social structure that generate strong emotions. Both groups show concern not just for evading detection, enforcing the law or ‘doing the job’, but seem to emotionally invest in tense, sometimes hostile interactions which themselves play a role in the reproduction of the social

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<sup>1</sup> People and places have been assigned pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

<sup>2</sup> The police force of the Irish Republic is known as the ‘Garda Síochána’ (Guardians of the Peace). Officers are referred to in their plural as Gardaí, and in the singular as Garda (but often as its anglicised equivalent of ‘Guard’). For more on the organisation and configuration of the Irish police force see Conway, 2012.

structure. Finally, exceptions to this more general pattern are explored to demonstrate that hostilities between the two groups need not be inevitable.

### **Understanding Police-Street Youth Interactions**

Existing literature, in the vast majority of cases, has attempted to understand the internal world of police forces and street cultural populations, without necessarily attending to the specificities of what occurs when they interact. There is an extensive literature that considers the internal world of the police officer: their occupational 'cop' culture (see Reiner, 2000, chap 4; Waddington, 1999a, chaps 2-4). Police culture has traditionally called for the maintenance of an us/them approach to dealing with the public, where there are myriad potential dangers to officer safety (see Kappeler et al., 1994). This preoccupation with safeguarding has been identified as extending to the members of the public that the police identify with, against the excluded elements that the police view as challenging dominant moral standards (see e.g. Cain, 1973; Smith and Gray, 1983; Waddington, 1999a: 100-101). Thus rank-and-file officers tend to define their mission as defending the 'ordinary', 'decent', 'respectable' sections of society against the 'rough' or 'street' urban poor who tend to be viewed as a threat.

The marginalized are thus open to be treated as 'police property': the natural and inevitable targets of aggressive policing efforts (Lee, 1981). Policing has been viewed as a means of coercively managing the 'underclass' (see Crowther, 2000). Choong (1998) for example, in setting out the ways in which the police exercise 'social discipline' (as opposed to law enforcement) against the particularly excluded, suggests that the unwritten cultural rules that organize day-to-day policing are underpinned by meanings which are generated by socio-economic inequality. It has been argued in the Irish context that contemporary public and operational expectations have moderated more traditional police-cultural orientations (Charman and Corcoran, 2015). Of course, whilst the essentialist, muscular approach to policing is far from universal where police forces are now increasingly sophisticated, multi-faceted and cosmopolitan (Herbert, 1998), such attitudes arguably remain observable as one of a more plural range (see Loftus, 2010).

Recent research (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Jackson and Sunshine, 2007; Jackson and Bradford, 2009; Bradford, 2012) has found that the public tend to have trust and confidence in the police where they believe that the police are fair and just and where they are relatively satisfied with the overall normative character of their area, which policing is seen to embody and defend. Whilst police trust and accountability in Ireland is complicated by the idiosyncratic nature of its history and force remit (see Manning, 2012), there is no reason to doubt that the key exception to the more general rule of confidence in the police similarly applies there. Jackson and Bradford (2009: 499) importantly note that in the context of socio-economically excluded groups (e.g. the young, the disadvantaged, ethnic minorities and other relevant groups):

Just as the police represent for many order, stability and cohesion, to people from these social groups they may represent the unfair priorities of the dominant social order, an interfering state or even oppression.

Those that feel they are discriminated against and/or 'profiled' will tend to perceive the police as operating according to low levels of procedural fairness (see Bradford et al. 2014). Mcara and Mcvie (2005) demonstrate from a large self-report study how disadvantaged young people in Scotland

perceive themselves classed as ‘the usual suspects’: in effect permanently subject to police attention. Similarly, research with ethnic minority youth in the US (Brunson and Miller, 2006) and the UK (Sharp and Atherton, 2007) found participants reporting negative interactions with the police whom they tended to perceive of poorly. Significantly, the adoption of a negative orientation towards policing is not necessarily based on individual experience alone but can be transmitted as part of a cultural process (ibid: 753). Here, the deployment of alternative cultural meanings can see those who feel persecuted by police officers viewing law enforcement as operating unfairly and illegitimately. Recent research has furthermore demonstrated that negative emotions are part of the process by which individuals come to distrust those who police them (Barkworth and Murphy, 2014).

It becomes important to consider the role of ‘street culture’ which can be thought of as ordering the social world of young, disadvantaged urban populations (see Ilan, 2015). Street culture is associated with ‘defiant’ norms and behaviours including antipathy to state authority, entrepreneurialism in the illicit economy and a ‘respect’ centred outlook that can result in violence. Street culture calls for the maintenance of a hostile relationship to the police, who are not to be cooperated with (see also Yates, 2006) and may be construed as the ‘enemy’. For Carr et. al (2007) and Brunson and Weitzer (2011) street culture is a subcultural position that can contribute to an interactional logic which places marginalised youth in greater conflict with police officers. Clearly structural forces, mediated through cultural norms have been shown to propel street youth and street-based officers into conflict with each other (see Reiner, 2000: 136; Mcara and Mcvie, 2005: 9). Arguably, however, the research has not yet sufficiently traced such structured-cultural imperatives into the situated moment of encountering policing on the street.

Whilst a significant amount of research, in particular undertaken in the US and usually based on large scale observational studies, has examined such moments, the focus here has tended to be on the operation of police discretion and decision-making. Such studies have concluded that a person’s race and their demeanour often influence the manner in which they are treated (e.g. Lundman, 1994; Terril and Mastrofski, 2002; Brown et. al, 2009). Demeanour in this context is arguably an interactive shorthand by which ‘bad attitude’ can be perceived as a marker of the ‘rough’, street values of the excluded and thus elicit a more rugged response (see also Waddington, 1999: 153-155). This research, however, is arguably police-focused and does not sufficiently penetrate the decision making process to excavate the depth of the cultural and emotional factors animating it.

The above literature suggests that the moment of interaction between street youth and police officers is linked to a range of deeper factors without comprehensively accounting for each of them in their full complexity. There is a lack of research that considers the interaction from both sides of the equation, with an attentive eye to what is simultaneously occurring at the levels of structure, culture and emotions within interactional dynamics. The data and analysis presented later provides this.

## **Methods and Context**

Studies which adopt a dual-perspective can offer distinctive results. Examples of such include Hobb’s work on East End offenders and detectives (1988) where he identified common commitments to ideals of working-class masculine entrepreneurship; Welsh’s (1981) work on the ludic or playful nature of the interactions between street-based police officers and marginalised youth; and

Choong's (1998) study which identified the tendency of officers to 'discipline' marginalised individuals. The data presented below is based on a multi-dimensional ethnography that involved participant observation and interviews with young, disadvantaged street offenders as well as active, serving police officers. Drawn from wider PhD research (Ilan, 2007) it furthermore involved various residents and local professionals from youth/social workers to estate managers. I was thus able to closely observe and interview each 'side', as well as various individuals more peripherally involved in their interactions. There were 45 formal interviews conducted with these different participants in conjunction with countless informal conversation which were recorded alongside observational field-notes. Most of the study's participants lived or worked in or around *Northstreet*, an area of disadvantage in Dublin's inner-city. Five day-a-week, full-time fieldwork took place between May 2004 and October 2005. Whilst the data for this research is thus approximately 10 years old, its age has no bearing on the principles it evidences. As the literature review indicates, these are issues that have existed for generations, and seem likely to continue.

The *Northstreet* community and the group of offending youth who were based around it were ultimately accessed through a local youth justice project. Access to the police station and those who worked there was arranged through negotiations with the appropriate high-ranking officers. The data produced consisted of field notes and interview transcripts that were manually analysed. Findings are presented below either as condensed narrative or extracts from the records made contemporaneously with the research. This paper primarily discusses two participant groups. *The Crew* is a fluid youth offending group with a core membership of eight young men between 14 and 19 and a peripheral membership of innumerable changing individuals. All core members reside within the inner-city of Dublin and are both socio-economically disadvantaged and marginalised within their own community (see further Ilan, 2011). The group participate in what a member of their local police force describe as 'the full time business' of bicycle, mobile phone and moped theft, cannabis consumption, casual violence and a range of other behaviours that might be described as 'anti-social'. Much of their time is, however, spent 'doing nothing': avoiding the supervision of school/training, their parents, youth and social workers as well as the critical eyes of their community leadership, local authority estate managers and of course, their declared enemies: the Gardaí. *The Crew* sit within a wider youth population who never or rarely offend. This wider population have a somewhat more complex relationship to the local police but reported generally similar sentiments to their offending peers.

The police participants in this research come from two distinctive units: 'the regulars' who are involved in standard reactive policing (responding to calls) as well as proactive patrols and operations as directed by their superior officers or less formally through their own initiative. The community policing team, on the other hand, can selectively answer calls and focus instead on building relationships with members of the public, attending meetings, and attempting to provide a better sense of 'assurance' by hearing and responding to concerns (see Fielding, 1995). Despite commonalities in their crime-fighting missions, to some extent the regular and community policing units engage differently with those who adhere to a street cultural orientation in order to achieve their goals, highlighting once again to the importance of attending to cultural nuance.

The *Northstreet* Garda station is proximate to the flat complex where a number of *Crew* members live. The two groups regularly survey and discuss each other. Interested *Northstreet* residents can often distinguish between one of 'their' Guards and those from another station. *Northstreet* youth

assign colourful monikers to various Gardaí. A particularly well-groomed Guard is known as ‘Westlife Wannabe’ (in reference to the clean-cut boy-band) another has been nicknamed ‘Pigsy’ (a very unkind reference to his bulk and facial features). *Northstreet* Guards are generally familiar with the names, faces, and often personal histories of local young people, where knowledge of their families and friendships tend to be deployed as a working shorthand to estimate their likelihood of involvement in criminality. Familiarity has the power here to breed contempt. Parallel but deeply unequal systems of knowledge about the activities of the other side emerge. Whilst street offenders such as *The Crew* obviously have relatively little access to the life and leisure spaces of the officers, street level officers tend to have wide access to the public spaces preferred by street youth. The two groups compete over and within inner-city spaces and frequently interact. The ethnographic character of the research allowed for the visceral sense of competitiveness between street youth and officers to become apparent. Below the structural categories of class and gender are deployed to explain how both sides come to view themselves in opposition to each other. Later, the ways in which such cultural meanings precipitate strong emotions and negative interactional dynamics are explicated.

### **Structured Cultural Identities**

The structural categories of class and gender play key roles in shaping the interactions between street-based youth and police officers. They lead to the formation of cultural meanings and imperatives in each group that place them in emotionally animated opposition to the other side.

Accounts offered by a significant number of the rank-and-file officers studied indicate a particular class-cultural view of the marginalised inner-city communities they police. It was common for officers to classify the population of their district as either *decent* (generally law abiding citizens) or *gougers*, (incorrigible criminals who pose a threat to decency). Conversations within the *Northstreet* station canteen demonstrated that Gardaí are firmly entrenched in the aspirations and mind-set of the ‘respectable’ classes regarding issues such as work, careerism and home ownership. They find it difficult to comprehend ‘street’ norms and ways of life. Gardaí work long, frequently anti-social hours and often find it difficult to comprehend how a proportion of their district population seem to eschew legitimate work in favour of crime:

‘Some people in the area will work hard and do well even if they are not working in a particularly good job, but others will not work... essentially give up and turn to robbing banks or shops or selling cannabis or cocaine or ecstasy: “recreational drugs”. Rather than wake up early in the morning to take a job, they use crime to generate income, they see nothing wrong with it, claim that the drugs do no harm and the goods are insured (Trevor, community Guard, extract from fieldnotes).

‘They have no guilt, no remorse... They have no respect for property. They just take what they want. The rest of us have to work and earn it. That doesn’t enter into their minds’ (Mick, community Guard, extract from fieldnotes).

For these participants, policing concerns defending what are seen to be core values of (the included section of) society. Persistent criminality is viewed as more than a series of offences against the law; it is seen as symptomatic of a troubling culture of the ‘underclass’ (see Crowther, 2000). Thus, whilst there is recognition that there are decent residents to defend in *Northstreet*, often it is obstructing



the *gougers* that goes to the heart of particular officers' view of their work. In other words, the structured position of these officers, contributes to a set of cultural meanings which prompt them to invest personally and emotionally in thwarting those they deem to adhere to street culture.

In return, groups such as *The Crew* who are deeply embedded in street culture tend to articulate a consistently hostile attitude towards the police. This is manifested in the use of derogatory terms such as 'scumbag' and a refusal to co-operate that can extend to concerted efforts to confound policing activities. Central to this outlook is the assertion that the Gardaí are corrupt and heavy-handed. There is little procedural fairness perceived here. Indeed, for those embedded in street culture the police lack entirely Beetham's (1991) notion of 'descriptive (or subjectively perceived) legitimacy' (see also Bradford, 2014). For example, Gráinne, a woman in her mid-twenties who lives in a flat complex close to *Northstreet* and whose brother is a known offender says this about the Gardaí:

'They are dirt. If they see you in the street they just move ya on. They stitch people up. They plant drugs on you if they don't like you. They're all the same, they're all dirty bastards' (extract from fieldnotes).

*The Crew* feel that they are illegitimately harassed due to their identity:

You're branded a scumbag just 'cos you're a young fellah from the city centre ... I was coming out of the archway, I hadn't even stepped out and I get nicked. Says he's charging me under section eight of the Criminal Justice Act or something. I says: "How can ya charge me for being in me own estate?" ... They grab me the other day and call me a scumbag (Philo, *Crew* member).

It is logical that those individuals who offend on a regular basis, and as a consequence have frequent contact with the Gardaí, would tend to view them in a negative light. 'It's only the people who we have to stop committing crime that hate us, and that's because we interfere with them' is how one Garda participant rationalises this phenomenon (extract from field notes). Here meaning seems to be central. Those who offend (or are close to those that do) distrust the motives of the police as is clear from the quotes above. Where techniques of neutralisation (Sykes & Matza, 1957) are often deployed to rationalise offending or indeed outright denials are issued, they subjectively view police attention as illegitimate. On the other hand, there is arguably also a tendency by police officers to rationalise away what is at times an overzealousness that does not necessarily contribute to harmonious community relations.

The perception of the police as illegitimate is lent force by a sense of a collective memory, when each incident of perceived mistreatment is viewed as part of a wider pattern of perceived degradation. Although *Crew* members seem to base their negative perceptions of policing on their subjective experiences of persecution as opposed to any direct experiences of violent mistreatment, stories of past violence and abuse of power are part of the collective memory of various sections of the *Northstreet* community. These include accounts of what certain police participants describe as 'the old ways': the police force's historic arbitrary and sometimes violent treatment of the urban poor; particular disputes and controversies; and the heavy-handed actions of a particular Guard who operated in the district some years ago. As such local and class identities serve to bolster a negative interpretation of police practice.

Where cop cultural and operational logics apply to render youth offenders such as *The Crew* as targets, this in turn can be interpreted as an act of illegitimate hostility and the police are constructed as ‘the enemy’. For the wider, less or non-offending youth population, the tendency of certain officers to treat them suspiciously as if they were *Crew* members serves to forge something of an ideological alliance between these youth groups who otherwise tend to dislike each other. These wider youth recognise the extent to which family, friendship or neighbourhood ties can unfairly mark them as trouble-makers in the police officers’ eyes. They resort to similar constructions of police behaviour as illegitimate. Robins and Cohen (1978) described the interactions between disadvantaged urban youth and street level officers as a contest between two different groups of working-class males, one of which had the full backing of the state. Whilst the class cultural and gender dynamics of policing are considerably more complex in contemporary times (see e.g. Loftus, 2010), these structural factors continue to significantly bear on the interactions studied here.

Although they exhibit opposing classed systems of meaning, the two groups seem to show curious parallels in adhering to the rugged cultural imperatives that tend to be linked to marginalised masculinities. Whilst *The Crew* is almost entirely male, a significant proportion of participant Gardaí were female. Nevertheless, the literature locates policing as operating overall according to masculinist principles (Reiner, 2000: 97-98; Loftus, 2008). This is particularly true for ‘street’ officers (see Hunt, 1984 cited in Messerschmidt, 1994: 178). Female officers may not be expected to be as physically imposing as their male counterparts, but may be nevertheless expected to participate in a street policing culture that is masculine in character (Martin, 1999)<sup>3</sup>. In other words, masculine forms of gender accountability (a requirement to appear tough and robustly assertive of their authority) could be said to regulate the conduct of street based officers regardless of their gender (see West and Zimmerman, 1987). ‘The very masculine character of police work, emphasizing aggression and bravado, combines with the generally hedonistic perspective of the lower ranks to magnify the importance (almost the pleasure) of fights’ (Holdaway, 1983: 130).

Masculinist notions of physical prowess and the ability to skilfully conquer risk are valued amongst rank-and-file Gardaí. Similarly, notions of strength, physical prowess and mental agility have also long been noted as important within the street culture of disadvantaged urban men (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011; Ilan, 2015). Notions of ‘respect’ are central to both street and cop cultural orientations. Whilst *Crew* members can react aggressively to slights, so too can officers take umbrage to outward shows of disrespect (see Van Maanen, 1978; Choong, 1998). Much as applying a muscular approach to their interactions with street youth serves as a resource for street officers to display respectable masculinity within an appropriately daring and risk laden context, a reverse analogous set of imperatives seem to apply to street cultural youth. Idealised notions of masculinity contribute to the intensity of emotions experienced by both parties to the interaction which itself becomes a resource to perform gender appropriately (see Messerschmidt, 1994).

Rank-and-file Gardaí arguably see themselves as relatively marginalised. Opportunities to display power can be in counter-intuitively short supply within their subjective lifeworlds (however

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<sup>3</sup> A number of male police participants reported preferring to be paired with a male when undertaking patrol work as they felt that men are more capable of dealing with physical challenges. A number of female participants reported awareness of this preference whilst others reported not encountering it.

members of the public might find this notion hard to believe). Gardaí interviewed expressed that although part of the 'included', they feel separate. They can feel estranged and ill-at-ease when socially interacting with civilians. Instead they prefer to socialise amongst themselves, extending the private familiar world of the canteen into various other aspects of their lives. They furthermore express distrust for their management: the upper-ranks, who they view as political, potentially unsupportive and far removed from the day-to-day realities and risks they face. In response to this subjective (but arguably not 'objective') marginalisation, rank-and-file officers deploy a defensive solidarity, which also stems in part from their mutual dependence in dangerous situations (Reiner, 2000: 91-2). This can involve the maintenance of a 'blue wall' or layer of defences to shield each other from accusations of wrong-doing (Conway, 2010) which curiously parallels the street cultural taboo against 'snitching', 'grassing' or 'ratting'. Moreover, the rugged performance of street policing serves for the rank-and-file officer to vindicate his role in society, as a defender of the moral and social order in a manner that distinguishes him from those officers who work in the safety of the station or head office.

Similarly, and in turn, *Crew* members and street youth seem to adopt 'protest masculinity' (Connell, 1995) and street culture as a means of responding to their marginalisation. This places them in the position by which they are called upon to exhibit defiance to police interventions. Indeed, they can earn street capital through visibly exhibiting such non-cooperation. Their sense of victimhood which is revealed through their articulated experiences of injustice, bolsters this position. The mantra of 'you can't win against the Guards', which is often repeated by young people in and around *Northstreet*, becomes part of a discourse which challenges the true competence and effectiveness of the Gardaí as men. The implication is that power asymmetries are truly what grant the police their advantage. This contributes to a sense that the police are not worthy of 'respect' and provides further impetus to act defiantly.

The meanings prompted by the class-cultures of both groups, and their similar but opposing senses of rugged masculinity, would seem to drive them into intensely emotive competition that manifests in the kinds of tense interactions described below.

### **Emotional and Interactional Dynamics**

Direct interactions between street youth and street based police officers are relatively frequent, but might only occupy a relatively small proportion of each group's average day, which curiously and counter-intuitively possess certain parallels. A large portion of police time is spent in routine activities, viewed as monotonous and mundane: answering calls, taking details, patrolling, surveying and administration (see also Fielding, 1988: 116). *The Crew* like many other working-class youth groups must negotiate long monotonous periods of 'doing nothing' (Corrigan, 1979). Though a relatively diminutive aspect of the officer's use of time, the task of directly confronting and ultimately apprehending criminals is of intense symbolic value through which (in particular regular) Gardaí, construct their occupation. 'Real' police work is constructed as action: speeding, scuffles and arrests, during which time passes quickly (Holdaway, 1983: 52). Equally, for *The Crew*, the relatively small proportion of their time that is spent in exciting moments of criminal activity or defiance are nevertheless central to their conversation culture and identities. The humorous banter, put-downs and jokes that *Crew* members exchange to pass the time exists similarly within the lifeworlds of rank-and-file Gardaí (see also Reiner, 2000: 89; Waddington, 1999: 114-115). Interactions between

both groups thus act as an important resource to generate exciting action and are frequently discussed as part of both groups' conversation culture. Ultimately whilst street level officers and street youth can share certain prerogatives around performing a rugged masculinity and have curious confluences in their lifestyles, it would be inaccurate and unhelpful to infer any kind of equivalence where huge disparities of power exist between them.

The vignette below provides an example of a meaningful interaction between Gardaí and *Crew* members that allows for an analysis of the emotional dynamics involved and their connections to the structured cultures earlier considered. Here mutual hostility is evident (interactions can also be more short lived and less overtly confrontational, community officers indeed, might be less inclined to be muscular in their intervention).

A Garda Car is parked at the top of *Northstreet* and two Gardaí are in front of it talking to [*Crew* members] dressed in tracksuits. There is a very sorry looking stripped down (allegedly stolen) moped close to them at the edge of the square... A Garda tells one of the lads I don't recognise to turn around; he cuffs him and puts him in the back of the (police) car... The Guards are questioning the remaining boys on the footpath... The lads are maintaining their position to the right of the police car and the Guards are beginning to lose patience: 'Have yis nowhere better to go? We'll take yis for loitering.' This isn't something they want to hear. One (*Crew* member) becomes aggravated and makes comments that I don't make out. One of the Guards walks right up to him, bending his tall frame to bring his face only an inch away from the young man's, staring him down. He speaks angrily pointing his finger (I am later told he was threatening to arrest him). 'Do ya want that fucker arrested?' calls the other Guard from the car. The admonished *Crew* member loses it and his brother has to hold him back as he attempts to go for the car based officer... The Gardaí are still waiting for a van to pick up the moped. *The Crew* members retreat to where I am standing. The member who had received the admonishment is still staring at the Guards with hatred in his eyes: 'Yis dirtbags!' he shouts over. They are outraged that they have been threatened with a loitering charge... As the police drive off, another *Crew* member pulls down his trousers and shows his backside to them (edited extract from fieldnotes).

It is possible to interpret these events as a moment within a 'ritualised game' (see further Manning, 1980; Reiner, 2000: 90). Developing this metaphor, the groups could be conceptualised as competing against each other for the achievement of various goals. A police victory may be signalled by arrest and conviction: 'return of work' – particularly where the offence or offender is high profile. For the offenders the game is won by evading these consequences whilst continuing to offend. Indeed, a number of police participants spoke about the competitive 'cat and mouse' interactions that they share with persistent offenders. There is arguably, however, more occurring in what happens above. The *Crew's* response whilst impotent is laced with bile and hostility. The Guards' openly disparaging remarks, indicate that they are not simply mechanically executing their duties. The classed meanings and gendered imperatives analysed in the previous section seem to ensure that both parties are emotionally invested in their interactions to the point that outcomes become loaded.

There is sometimes sympathy expressed by officers for the difficult lives experienced by *The Crew*, but nevertheless a determination to hold them accountable for their crimes. Officers can feel that

the mere enforcement of the law cannot always achieve this. Where charges hold, the legal system tends to be lenient in sentencing young people for many initial mild to moderate offences. The charges moreover tend to be diffused between the group and it can be difficult even to bring charges where it is unclear which individuals are responsible. Thus, even if it is too difficult to detect and effectively prosecute each incident, underpinning police interactions with certain street youth is the working assumption that their target group are recalcitrant and continuously offending. This can be experienced as a perpetual bait. A strong emotional undertone thus enters police interactions with street youth. This prevents 'the game' turning on strictly rationalistic prizes. Police work is a form of 'emotional labour' (Martin, 1999) and this makes it difficult for officers to work purely according to operational principles.

Rather, blatant disregard for the respectable standards the police view themselves as defending and the outright lack of deference to their authority is viewed in classed and gendered terms as an inescapable slight, a move to negate the social order they are emotionally dedicated to upholding. 'Bad attitude' becomes a frustrating impediment to the successful execution of their job. Katz (1988, in discussing the more extreme example of 'righteous slaughter') has argued that 'moral emotions' such as these can burn powerfully and prompt a forceful reaction, particularly where there is an audience. Dealing with disadvantaged youth on the street, where anyone of them might be an offender-in-hiding represents a potential source of resentment and frustration. Allowing the morally-suspect 'scumbags' a victory is humiliating.

Success on the other hand, particularly where it has involved the display of physical prowess can provide visceral, emotional satisfactions and can become widely celebrated within the respective cultures. I arrive on one occasion to witness a 'good capture'. A suspect attempts to run over the arresting Guard in a stolen car, crashes it, attempts to flee on foot but is wrestled to the ground. The incident becomes central to canteen conversation for the next two days and the arresting Guard is roundly congratulated. Raymond, a Guard in one of the regular units at *Northstreet Station* explains in an extract from fieldnotes:

He says that in a chase all regard for the car goes out the window (unless it is unmarked) and they will do everything they can to apprehend the individual they are pursuing. He says that there is nothing like a successful chase, all the other (Garda) cars pull up around the capture and everyone gets out, congregates and discusses the incident: 'You'll light up a cigarette and it'll be the best cigarette you've ever had in your life'.

There is no humiliation here, but triumph through masculinist endeavour (indeed some may find the image of the post-climax cigarette as particularly illuminating). Visceral satisfaction accompanies the embodied experience of being a 'thief taker' – the aspect of 'the job' that gendered and classed cop culture values highly (see Fielding, 1988: 125-127). To add to this, the hostile reception Gardaí can face within certain inner-city housing estates combine with the general dangers of 'the job' to unleash an urgency and adrenaline which arguably serve to raise the emotional stakes.

The reaction of *Crew* members to the arrest of their friend in the earlier vignette can neither be seen as rational participation in 'the game'. If their goal is to evade criminal charges, then displaying hostility not only attracts attention to the youth, but could lead to charges in and of themselves. Their response is instead informed by a sense of humiliation and anger. Their subjective, classed

interpretation of events is one of illegitimate persecution and their vitriol is underpinned by their own righteous indignation. In the situated moment they thus respond to a force they perceive of as hypocritical and malicious by exhibiting protest-masculinist defiance, gaining a momentary sense of resisting a power greater than their own. This offers a short-lived visceral satisfaction that is ultimately self-defeating (see Ilan, 2015). As performance, however, it asserts the masculinity and street cultural orientation of *Crew* members. Such moments moreover provide the opportunity to wring excitement and action out of what might otherwise be a potentially dull and monotonous day. Cultural criminologists have highlighted the extent to which moments of action and energy provide viscerally satisfying sensations (Ferrell et al., 2015). Lyng's notion of 'edgework' (2005), the voluntary assumption of risk (often associated with masculinity) to generate heightened and pleasurable sensations, can be important for understanding particular types of expressive criminality. Certainly, it occupies an important component of *Crew* members' sense of self (see further Ilan, 2013). It is possible, moreover, to extend this analysis to street policing amongst rank-and-file officers, who are 'risk workers' in Lyng's terms.

Moments of interaction provide a meaningful nexus between two masculinist and opposing classed cultures that place significance in the activities that put them into opposition, as well as their performances when face-to-face. The confluence of structured-cultural meanings, gendered imperatives and the surge of emotional risks and rewards contribute to the potential for hostilities in the meetings between the groups. It becomes clear that it is important to understand the interactions between street cultural youth and police officers dependently rather than separately. The intensity of the emotions and investments involved make more sense in light of those exhibited by the other side. It is difficult for the research reviewed earlier in the paper to produce this conclusion given their particular scope and foci. More than this, the interactions themselves play a role in reproducing the social structures they reflect. Much like Paul Willis' 'lads' (1977) who defy school authorities, the street youth who exhibit a defiant attitude to policing are likely to evoke greater police frustration and ultimately place themselves in an ever more precarious and excluded position. This in turn feeds back into cop cultural lore about the nature of disadvantaged young men. The cycle becomes somewhat self-perpetuating.

### **Contingent Cultures**

Having set out how the interactions studied here are shaped by issues of structure filtered through the mechanisms of group culture (both classed and gendered) and into the emotionally-animated moment, it is important to qualify these explanations. Both idealised cultures and modes of performance are contingent, malleable and subject to reflexive reinterpretations. The strategies and patterns of behaviour exhibited by either group seem to vary as attenuated versions of street and cop culture are deployed, where instrumentality defeats the emotional seductions of reacting strongly and where positive outcomes allow for alternative narratives of ideal performance. Indeed, there are times where both offenders and officers have cause to display competence in the world of their 'opponents'. Mutual hostility is not inevitable.

Whilst *Northstreet* locals can develop a particularly strong disliking for individual officers, rare exceptions will be identified as fair to the point that 'you almost wouldn't call him a Guard'. Indeed, a number of officers (particularly those associated with community policing) advocate the maintenance of relatively cordial relationships with those identified as *gouger*. Sean, an experienced

community Guard frequently visits local drug projects to ‘sort out warrants’ for addicts – expediting their charges and requesting a temperate sentence for them. Acts such as this draw Gardaí into casual conversations which yield pieces of information that when collated begin to form a broad body of knowledge about offending in the district. He explains in this extract from fieldnotes the advantage of bringing what he sees as a ‘human’ approach to dealing with persistent offenders:

A lot of Guards wouldn’t have handled it that way, they would have come in and given it all that (makes a hand gesture symbolising a flapping mouth). They would have given them the bollock or might take them in for a drug search. We just talk to them, like you know, they’re human beings... It puts them at their ease when, you know, you talk to them like people and I’d swear. They don’t mind it’s what they’d know. I’d say ‘fuck this’ and ‘fuck that’ and that’s good even because they can see then that you’re alright, you’re not trying to be somebody that you’re not and they do respond to it... We talk to the people ... Don’t get me wrong, they don’t like us or anything, but they’d have a little respect for us, a little more than they’d have for the Guards that go in and give them the shit and search them for drugs. They talk to us at least.

Here where swearing is not couched in an aggressive attempt to assert order, but in a casual conversational dynamic, its meanings change. The street and cop cultural imperatives to mistrust and hate the other side attenuate. Though defences remain raised, hostilities are muted in favour of instrumental arrangements.

When operating within the disadvantaged inner-city it can be useful for officers to cultivate street capital. They may do this with physicality and hardened attitudes that mirror traits respected by street offenders themselves (see Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011). Equally, a form of street capital might emerge from an astute ability to bargain favours for information, or indeed through a cultivated sense of fairness and trustworthiness (which crucially must remain partial for officers not to be seen as weak and thus contemptible). Community Gardaí such as Sean gather valuable intelligence for the district. Indeed, the community policing room in *Northstreet* Station serves as something of an information hub about the lives and activities of local offenders. A combination of information gained from this kind of casual conversation and shared by *decent* residents who have come to trust the community police vest this unit with a number of advantages in operational terms. Being able to conduct *real* policing (e.g. drug raids etc.) on foot of this, vindicates their attenuated version of cop culture.

Participant community Gardaí directly articulate a sense that their working practices can be contrasted to the ‘Starsky and Hutch’ approach of certain of their colleagues in the regular unit. A focus on incremental achievement is promoted above a veneration of action. This does not diminish their sense of mission, but provides an alternative frame for constructing it. A broader range of cultural scripts around poverty and disadvantage, situated emotions (which are more likely to include sympathy) as well as measured conduct in the moment facilitates this work. Such officers are not, however, tied into the same cycle of reactive ‘call outs’ as ‘the regulars’. Similarly, one of the older street cultural groups on *Northstreet* (alleged semi-professional criminals in their twenties) attenuate what otherwise might be an instinctive response to display hostility towards police officers. Instead, perhaps recognising that smooth relationships might obfuscate the extent of their law-breaking, they tend to chat easily with passing officers. Ultimately, the existence of attenuated

cop and street cultural orientations points a way towards a potential possibility for addressing the hostilities so often existing between the two groups.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the interactions between street youth and street-based police officers are underpinned by structural, cultural and emotional processes which press both groups into an iterative cycle of interpretation, action and reaction that can ultimately support muscular policing practices, perceptions of injustice and mutual antipathy. Their classed cultural scripts tend to cause each to see the behaviour of the other side as illegitimate, whilst their respective masculinist imperatives demand a forceful reaction to this. This accounts for the ways in which their interactions can become animated by strong emotions, disdain and defiance. Mutually hostile interactions, moreover, contribute to the perpetuation of the structured-cultural scripts which place the parties in opposition to each other, in effect driving the reproduction of structured positions in criminal justice. There are, however, exceptions to this rule where attenuated variants of street and cop cultures are deployed. Ethnography allowed for the layers of structure, culture and emotionality that underpinned the interactions studied, as well as the energy and visceral sensations that animate them to become visible. As a method it thus offers policing research an optic that can usefully penetrate the surface of everyday occurrences.

The multi-level analysis offered in this paper provides a more fulsome, specific and nuanced account of how and why such interactions unfold than approaches in the extant literature. Given that such interactions are at the fault lines of the potentially combustible relationships that police forces can have with marginalised communities, these insights are particularly important. The hostilities that can build might be implicated in both instances of abuse of authority and the dramatic overspill of anti-police sentiment that can manifest in urban rioting. There is little scope for improving relationships where each side considers the other to be 'scumbags'. Whilst policing is undoubtedly a difficult and demanding job, officers are not subject to the same levels of perceived surveillance, humiliation and injustice. Whilst challenging potential offenders is important, the potential for law-abiding members of marginalised populations to be dragged into negative interactions should be recognised and guarded against. There is scope, moreover, to reflect on how attenuated variants of cop culture might be cultivated at an organisational level within police forces, given its potential both to enhance engagement with excluded populations and to yield operational results.

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